

### **Public Health Assessment Process**

The Health Assessment and Toxicology (HAT) Program in the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) works to protect the public from toxic exposures and to deliver health education about toxic chemicals. One way to accomplish this work is to perform a Public Health Assessment.

### What is a Public Health Assessment?

A Public Health Assessment is a report that reviews available information about hazardous substances found at specific sites. It also evaluates whether exposure to the hazardous substances might cause harm to people. DSHS works with federal and state environmental agencies and with local government and residents to gather information for a Public Health Assessment.

Some sites are identified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) as being harmful to the environment or to people living near the site. These sites may be listed on the National Priorities List (NPL), also known as the "Superfund List". A Public Health Assessment must be completed when a site is proposed to the NPL.



#### What does the Public Health Assessment Consider?

Public Health Assessments consider:

- ✓ What levels of hazardous substances were found
- ✓ Are people being exposed to hazardous substances, and if so how (breathing air, drinking or contacting water, contacting or eating soil, or eating food)
- ✓ What harm the substances might cause
- ✓ Whether working or living nearby might affect people's health
- ✓ Are there other dangers to people, such as unsafe buildings, abandoned mine shafts, or other physical hazards



To answer these questions, DSHS looks at three primary sources of information

- ✓ Environmental data, such as information about the contaminants and how people could come in contact with them
- ✓ **Community concerns,** such as reports from the public about how the site affects their health or quality of life.
- ✓ Health effects data, including available information on community rates of illness, disease, and death compared with national and state rates



# A Public Health Assessment involves the community -

During the Public Health Assessment process communication between the public and DSHS is important. DSHS gathers community concerns from citizens and local groups. Before the Public Health Assessment is finished, it is available in the community during the Public Comment Period. The Public Comment Period lets the community tell DSHS how well the Public Health Assessment addresses their concerns. DSHS responds to all community concerns and comments received in the final Public Health Assessment.

### **For Additional Information:**

Texas Department of State Health Services Health Assessment & Toxicology Group 1100 West 49th Street, MC 1964 Austin, Texas 78756 1-800-588-1248

## A Public Health Assessment may lead to public health actions –

A Public Health Assessment is not the same thing as a medical exam or a community health study. It can sometimes lead to those things, as well as other public health activities such as -

- ✓ Educational activities like community meetings, school presentations, or the distribution of pamphlets or fact sheets
- ✓ Actions to prevent contact with chemicals at the site – like putting up a fence or posting warning signs
- ✓ Recommendations to the EPA or the TCEQ on how to reduce contact with chemicals on the site
- ✓ An exposure investigation that uses biological testing to measure current exposure and accumulation of chemicals in community members



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